



Narrative Plus: Designing and Implementing the Common Core State Standards with the Gift Essay

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ABSTRACT

The authors of this article describe their inquiry into implementation of the writing-focused Common Core State Standards in a co-taught English 9 class in an urban school. They describe instructional moves designed to increase student success with an assignment called the Gift Essay, with particular focus on planning and other organizational strategies, use of exemplars, and social interactions of varying kinds. Examples of student work and classroom materials to scaffold high-quality writing are provided. The article concludes with a call for interpreters of the CCSS to embrace a broad conceptualization of genre without stigmatizing personal narrative or insisting on genre purity.

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New York teachers are no doubt aware that decreased emphasis on literary texts and increased attention to informational reading and writing are among the “six shifts” associated with the state’s adoption of the Common Core State Standards (<http://engageny.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/common-core-shifts.pdf>). The writing anchor standards for grades six to 12 recommend teaching text types and purposes—argument, information/explanation, and narrative—that parallel those tested by the National Assessment of Educational Progress for more than two decades (Applebee, 2007).

It is likely no accident that narrative is positioned third in the list if the comments of principal CCSS architect David Coleman are any indication. Last year, Coleman said in a presentation at the State Education Department that “the two most popular forms of writing in the American high school today” were “the exposition of a personal opinion” and “the presentation of a personal matter.” In remarks widely reproduced in the blogosphere, Coleman argued that personal writing’s prevalence was problematic because



[A]s you grow up in this world you realize people really don't give a sheet about what you feel or what you think. What they instead care about is can you make an argument with evidence, is there something verifiable behind what you're saying or what you think or feel that you can demonstrate to me. It is rare in a working environment that someone says, "Johnson, I need a market analysis by Friday but before that I need a compelling account of your childhood (Coleman, 2011, p. 10).

Although Coleman later claimed he should have chosen his words more carefully (Lewin, 2012), those words—and others related to Common Core priorities—continue to reverberate, for good and for ill, in conversations about writing among teachers, administrators, and faculty. Because of writing's central place in college and career readiness (Conley, 2008), it is important to identify pedagogical approaches to prepare students for the demands of writing in the twenty-first century.

Recently, we explored these issues while implementing the writing-focused portions of the CCSS in a ninth-grade English class we co-taught. Aware of Coleman's critique, we were interested in expanding the genre range of students' writing and in raising expectations for the quality of their work. At the same time, we were determined not to abandon best practice (Graham & Perin, 2007; Smagorinsky, 2007) in a hasty response to new policies, and we did not share Coleman's dismissal of narrative.

When we conceptualized the first full-length essay that students would polish via multiple drafts in English 9, we wanted them to construct a text more sophisticated than a chronological recount. The Common Core's emphasis on increasing challenge for all students influenced our thinking. Yet we knew that for struggling or inexperienced writers—most of our class—narrative was familiar. If we wanted to work on revision and peer response, skills we felt were central to increases in quality, we wondered about the wisdom of doing so with a fairly new genre such as argument. Consequently, we designed a hybrid assignment, one that straddled several text types delineated in the writing standards and allowed us to address other standards simultaneously. We learned a great deal about the CCSS and teaching writing from designing, implementing, and inquiring into what John nicknamed the Gift Essay.

In the pages that follow, we describe our classroom context and our collaboration. We explain how we designed the Gift Essay assignment, describe the instructional moves we made to support students' success, and illustrate the impact of these moves with sample student work. We close with recommendations for future theorizing and practice around writing and the CCSS.

The Classroom Context

From January to June 2012, we co-planned and co-taught a ninth-grade English class at Nottingham, an urban high school enrolling grades 9-12. John was in his sixth year of teaching, following a previous career in communications. He was completing the second of two young adult novels, one of which was being circulated to publishers. Kelly was on sabbatical from her position as a professor at Syracuse University, where she taught literacy methods courses. Our professional relationship began when John participated in writing-focused professional development Kelly facilitated during the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 school years. We have also taught together since 2010 in the Nottingham Summer Writing Institute, a three-week initiative to help rising ninth graders develop their writing skills and transition to high school (Chandler-Olcott, Burnash, DeChick, Donahue, Gendron, Smith, Taylor, & Zeleznik, 2012). We both felt



that writing deserved more attention in most English classes, and we made implementation of the writing standards central to our collaboration.

During the first half of the year, John served as solo instructor for the course, entitled Strategic Reading and organized around the Talent Development curriculum for students two or more years below grade level in reading (McPartland, Balfanz, & Shaw, 2004). Students were assigned to the class primarily using their eighth-grade ELA scores, and they received 80 minutes of daily instruction, doubling that received by peers not in the intervention. In January, when Kelly arrived, the course switched from Strategic Reading to credit-bearing English 9 but continued to meet 80 minutes per day with the same roster. We co-designed an English 9 curriculum that balanced attention to novels, plays, and nonfiction; included use of a writer's notebook to organize and extend students' thinking; and involved students in a mix of paired, small-group, and whole-group discussions.

At the time we implemented the essay assignment described here, 17 students regularly attended the class, including seven girls and 10 boys. All but one were students of color, mostly identifying as African American. Two were English language learners, the other 15 native English speakers. Students' surveys suggested that most saw themselves as "good" writers (the midpoint for quality in a list of choices) who tended to frame their goals for improvement around technical skills such as spelling.

The Assignment

To promote critical thinking and synthesis by students as well as differentiate the credit-bearing course beginning in January from the fall intervention, we designed an overarching essential question for English 9: *How do our relationships help and hinder us?* The Gift Essay assignment (see Figure 1) was intended to help students explore that question personally, but to do so from a more writerly stance than the one emphasized in Strategic Reading. Even though the essential question cued students to think about both help and hindrances, we chose to steer students in their Gift Essays toward help. We speculated that students might be more comfortable allowing others to read their work, as well as revisiting their topics via multiple drafts, if they were discussing experiences with a positive outcome. Several students still chose to focus on painful or difficult events such as running away from home, but the assignment design meant that they did so within an affirmative frame that led to less balking at sharing.

We also chose to limit the topic to a person who offered help because of our awareness that for many, our students' status as youth of color attending an urban school had a tendency to frame them with deficit perspectives (Alonso, Anderson, Su, & Theoharis, 2009). Designing our assignment to promote students' discussion of those who supported and valued them was a way of talking back to those negative portrayals so that students' resilience and resources could be seen and celebrated. We felt such a move was consistent with Delpit's (2012) recommendations for creating excellence in urban classrooms, including:

- Provide children with the emotional ego strength to challenge racist societal views of their own competence and worthiness and that of their families and communities
- Recognize and build on children's strengths
- Honor and respect the children's home cultures (p. xix)

To underscore the importance of the help they received, we gave each student a copy of his or her essay printed on stationery to give to the people about whom they wrote, and we provided class time and cards for them to write an explanatory note to accompany that gift.



Figure 1: Gift Essay Argument

The Gift Essay: In English 9 so far, we have explored the essential question: How do your relationships help and hinder us? We have considered this question in the context of several texts, including the novels *Tears of a Tiger* and *Of Mice and Men*. Now, you will construct an extended piece of writing (at least 500 words) that connects this essential question to your own life as well as to literature.

Your task is to write an essay in which you explore a specific aspect of a relationship with someone who helped you in a particular way. You must include the following:

- An introduction to the essay that engages and interests the reader
- A clear explanation of who the person is, and how she or he helped you
- Specific details and examples to support your argument that the person's actions were helpful
- A connection between the help you received and a piece of the literature of your choice from either Strategic Reading or English 9
- A conclusion that ties the essays together

As you write this essay, you will also be working on skills related to revision and providing/receiving peer feedback. Everyone in our class will help each other make these essays as strong as they can be. In addition, they will be shared, for positive comments only, with the members of another English 9 class as part of an in-class writer's celebration, with refreshments, scheduled for Friday, March 23.

You are strongly encouraged to make a gift of your essay to the person about whom you write, and you will receive special stationary on which to print it when you are finished revising and editing.

To further distinguish the assignment from a chronological recount, as well as increase the level of challenge, we wrote it up using a framework from Smagorinsky (2007), whose writing prompts always include a description of the assignment connecting it to the larger goals of the course or unit, followed by a set of bulleted items for students to address. According to Smagorinsky, the former helps students to link the texts they produce to the “social purposes” for those texts, while the latter provides students “with a clear set of parameters for producing their texts” and “an understanding of how their work will be evaluated” (p. 75).

As we drafted and revised our prompt, referring frequently to the CCSS standards for grades nine to 10, we realized that the essay addressed several standards and combined elements of several text types. We wanted students to articulate clearly how their featured person had helped them, and to develop that idea with examples and details—a hallmark of W2, “Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.” At the same time, we wanted students to use an anecdotal lead to create reader interest, and we expected that they would likely tell a story, or several stories, in the body—elements more closely associated with W3, “Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective



technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.” Rather than rewriting the assignment description to address just one standard, we resolved to implement the more blended approach while gathering data to guide reflection on the process. We also committed to designing the high-challenge, high-support instruction that research (Gibbons, 2009) documents as yielding increased achievement among diverse populations.

Instructional Approaches Designed to Increase Quality

One of the best indicators of success with the Gift Essay was that everyone completed and submitted it, albeit with varying degrees of attention to required components, in a class where task completion rate tended to be fairly low. Students selected a range of people about whom to write: seven focused on a parent, four on a friend, three on a sibling, one on a cousin, and two on adult mentors in settings beyond the classroom. Their focus and engagement over five days of instruction (see Figure 2 for an overview) were notable not just to us but also to several colleagues who pushed into our classroom. Their final drafts represented most students’ best developed writing to that point in the year, and about two thirds volunteered to read them aloud at our class-wide celebration, suggesting a high degree of pride in their work.

Interested in interrogating these positive indicators in light of CCSS demands, we gathered, read, and discussed the various data we collected during the unit, including classroom materials, John’s plans and writer’s notebook entries, Kelly’s field notes, and copies of student work. This review helped us identify a small set of instructional practices that increased the quality of student work: support for planning and organizational strategies, use of exemplars, and social interactions of varying kinds. We discuss each in turn.

Supporting Planning and Organization

Much has been made about Coleman’s argument that inviting students to engage in “cold” close readings of text, with little or no pre-reading support from teachers, is a key component in creating greater independence as readers (Gewertz, 2012). Less has been said about whether teachers should make a parallel move toward supporting greater independence for students approaching a writing task, although the list of strategies appearing in W5, “Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach”, implies an expectation that teachers will provide instruction around planning.

John’s observations from the beginning of the school year suggested that it would be disastrous to leave students to puzzle through the planning phase of the Gift Essay alone. Many seemed accustomed to assignment templates specifying what each paragraph in an essay should include—an expectation that did not align well with the bulleted list of overall requirements recommended by Smagorinsky (2007). Because we had committed to increasing challenge for students, we resisted the inclination to provide the linear prescriptions some sought. Instead, we resolved to provide planning instruction that would launch the assignment well while also building skills that would transfer to other contexts.

Our first challenge was to set a purpose for the essay linking to the world beyond English 9. To this end, we showed students the assignment then gave them this prompt: “Think Pair Share: Why do you think we might ask you to do an assignment like this one right now? (2 minutes).”



Figure 2:
Unit Overview

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
			<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Introduce assignment• Adapted “Deciding What to Say” Activity• Nonstop write (10 minutes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Read and annotate teacher exemplar• Teacher think-aloud on graphic organizer completion• Students complete graphic organizers
Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
No class because of assembly	In computer lab: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mini-lesson on heading and saving conventions• Librarian book talk on choices for independent reading project• Drafting time	In computer lab: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Continued drafting• Teacher conferences and some peer conferences, guided by rubric• Students revisit connection paragraphs in exemplar	In computer lab: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Continued drafting and revising• Teacher and peer conferences, guided by rubric	In computer lab: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Continued drafting and revising• Teacher and peer conferences, guided by rubric and checklist
Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Romeo and Juliet unit begins• Poll students about willingness to read and Wednesday celebration	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Romeo and Juliet work• Extra time after school in the computer lab for those who want it	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Gift essay celebration		



During the subsequent large-group discussion, we recorded the following ideas and displayed them with our document camera:

1. To make us better writers.
2. To refresh our memories from when we were young.
3. To see our improvement.
4. To show what a good essay looks like.
5. To make us a better person.
6. To think back to what we learned.
7. So we can realize how books related and don't relate to our lives (field notes, March 15, 2012).

Students' contributions demonstrated their awareness of purposes for personal writing, including to remember and to reflect. To reinforce the idea that such writing has value, as well as address [school]'s mission of developing college and career readiness, we showed students essay topics from the Common Application used by nearly 500 colleges and universities then asked them to think-pair-share again, this time about which topics most resembled the Gift Essay assignment.

**Figure 3:
[Author 1]'s Modeled Responses to Help-Focused "Deciding What to Say" Prompts**

1. A time when you gave someone advice.
Mom: "Don't worry about it if you can't see it from the road."
2. A time when someone gave you money or a helpful gift.
Grampie: \$20 for a taxi
3. A time when someone showed you how to do something.
Aunt: Parallel park.
4. A time when someone showed you how to do something.
Jim: Taught me how to ski.
5. A time when someone showed you how to do something.
Quinn: VuDu remote.
6. A time when someone encouraged you.
Mr. Illingworth: Gave me a job so I could go to grad school.
7. A time when someone encouraged you.
Email from a former student on a bad day.
8. A time when someone helped you do something so you didn't have to do it alone.
Putting the wood in with my friends.
9. A time when someone calmed you down or comforted you.
Michelle: During senior year.

Once we had established a purpose, we helped students generate multiple topics from which to choose. We adapted an activity entitled Deciding What to Say (Bernabei, 2007) that we had used in the summer writing institute. Where the original framing helps students brainstorm



various personal topics, our version helped them brainstorm specifically around the idea of “help.” Kelly engaged students in a shared reading of the dictionary definition for that word, guided them in generating meanings, then demonstrated how she used her notebook to produce ideas in the Deciding What to Say categories we devised (see Figure 3). This approach built academic vocabulary (another of the “six shifts” associated with the CCSS) at the same time it helped students brainstorm nine topic possibilities. They narrowed these to three with the help of a partner, then each chose one as the starting point for a timed free-write.

After 10 minutes, we asked students to count the words they generated. Most students wrote steadily for the time period, yielding a class average of 146 words. Four generated more than 200 words, a third of the total we suggested in the assignment description. Students’ fluency with this initial brainstorming allowed us to introduce the idea that what would make the Gift Essay challenging was not producing enough words but rather choosing the right words, in the right sequence, given what they wanted to convey—a concept most closely linked to CCSS W5: “Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.”

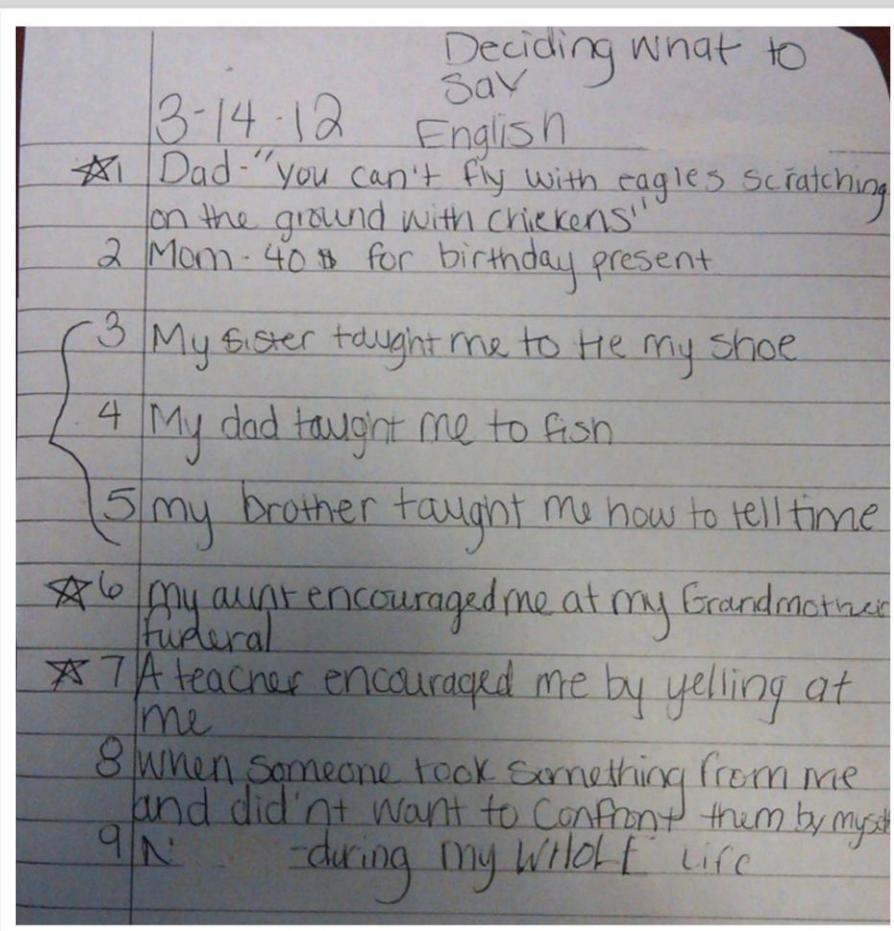
During the next class, we offered students a graphic organizer with boxes linked to the various essay components in our bulleted list, and John modeled at the document camera how to transfer ideas from his own free-write to appropriate sections of the organizer. In his think-aloud, he explained which sentences best described how his grandfather helped him learn to be a storyteller. Kelly then showed students how she cut unnecessary material from her free-write as she organized it around a key idea about her aunt’s teaching her to parallel park. During the last 30 minutes, we observed and conferred with students as they compared their free-writes to their graphic organizers and generated more text for sections that needed it. During our planning meeting later that day, we noted that every student showed us some text at his or her initiation (field notes, March 16, 2012).

By the following class, Day 3 of the unit, students were well primed and eager to compose on the keyboard. We had reserved the computer lab on the other side of the building for the first of three days. Although John sent a student ahead with a box containing student folders and writer notebooks, Kelly, who arrived first, could not initially locate it. That students valued the planning and initial drafting they did was clear from their annoyance that their materials were temporarily missing. They wanted to begin typing and not to start from scratch. Not a single student asked what he or she was supposed to be doing at the beginning of class; everyone had a plan for moving forward (field notes, March 30, 2012).

The usefulness of our approach to planning was most apparent with Jonathan, a thoughtful contributor to class discussion but one whose notebook entries were often half-finished and who rarely submitted homework. Jonathan thrived on the carefully structured sequence of activities leading from assignment discussion and exemplar analysis to topic brainstorming. His entry for Deciding What to Say was complete and thorough (see Figure 4), and his 10-minute free-write launched him solidly into his essay about advice his father gave him related to the aphorism, “You can’t fly with eagles [if you’re] scratching on the ground with chickens.” During our second day in the lab, he was so focused on drafting new material for the second and third paragraphs of his piece—where he provided examples of conversations in which his father reiterated the advice—that John made a point of shaking his hand at the end of class. He was able to sustain that focus throughout the unit, eventually volunteering to read his piece at the class celebration.



Figure 4:
Jonathan's "Deciding What to Say" Notebook Entry



To signal the authenticity of the Gift Essay, as well as make it easier for us to provide explicit instruction around its dimensions, we integrated attention to exemplar texts into our instructional practice at several points. This choice was supported by research on effective writing pedagogy, particularly Graham and Perin's (2007) finding of positive effects when students are provided with models of good writing then encouraged to "analyze these examples and to emulate the critical elements, patterns, and forms embodied in the models" in their own work (p. 28). Because our class included a disproportionate number of underprepared literacy learners due to district and school tracking practices, we wanted to ensure a closer fit between the exemplar texts we used and the dimensions of the assignment, to ensure accessibility and applicability for students. We also wanted to position ourselves as fellow writers in the classroom community—a practice recommended by Gallagher (2012). Consequently, each of us authored an exemplar text that met the assignment criteria, and we used these in a variety of ways throughout the unit to increase the quality of students' work.

As we discussed in more depth in the previous section, our own exemplars were embedded in our initial instruction on planning and organization. Kelly modeled how to complete the Deciding What to Say activity for students, then each of us completed a 10 minute



free-write along with students that served as the seed for the full-blown typed essays we shared later. John used his free-write to model how to use the graphic organizer we employed as an intermediate planning tool. Each of these instructional moves was intended to demystify the drafting process and offer strategies students could adopt to select a satisfying and appropriate topic, as well as plan an effective approach to their essays.

Next, before students moved to computer-based drafting, we asked them to read Kelly's essay and to label the assignment components from the bulleted list. This helped them to recognize that some criteria would be addressed in a section of the essay—for instance, “an introduction to the essay that engages and interests the reader” would likely appear in the first paragraph—while others, such as “specific details and examples to support your argument that the person’s actions were helpful,” would be addressed in multiple places. Although some students struggled with this concept, teacher-guided discussions about Kelly’s essay helped some to get beyond what John called during class their tendency to think “immediately of five paragraphs [in a certain order] when we see ‘essay’” (field notes, March 16, 2012).

Later, as students worked in the lab, we circulated the room to have teacher- and student-initiated conferences that implicated exemplar texts, both our own and, occasionally, student samples that we copied with permission. When students struggled with an aspect of the assignment, we marked portions of the exemplars and asked them to reread those sections before we offered suggestions. This approach was intended to promote students’ independence—to allow them to do as much as they could for themselves, in the spirit of the Common Core—but with enough teacher direction to keep them from disengaging in frustration.

The best example of the latter approach came from students’ attempts to make a connection in their essay between the help they received and a relationship they read about in a piece of literature from either Strategic Reading or the first two months of English 9. This was a small portion of the assignment—just a paragraph in each exemplar—and we did not think that successful performance with it could provide definitive evidence of students’ having met CCSS W11, “Develop personal, cultural, textual, and thematic connections within and across genres as they respond to texts through written, digital, and oral presentations, employing a variety of media and genres.” Nonetheless, we felt the inclusion of this element had the potential to (a) prompt students’ review of previously-read material in ways that would help them later on the essay task for the English Regents examination, requiring students to discuss two texts using a quotation as a “critical lens”; and (b) increase the challenge of the assignment. The dominant mode of the essay was still narrative, but in this case, it was narrative-plus: narrative enhanced by a literary connection that helped the essays transcend chronological recount.

For many students, this was the most difficult aspect. But directing them to the relevant portions of the exemplars usually yielded results in students’ drafts, as this excerpt from Kelly’s notes indicates:

Malik finally has three or four solid paragraphs, though he does not have his connection to literature or his conclusion. I get him exemplars, mark them up, and tell him to read them to give himself ideas about how to approach that part. I make a list of books he can think about using, including *Breaking Through*, which Elijah, who’s sitting next to him, has open in front of his keyboard as he writes. [Malik] says, “I got this, Miss,” and I leave him. Later, I cycle back because he says he needs help with the conclusion, but I end up just pointing out the final paragraphs in the exemplars, and he says he’s fine again (field notes, March 23, 2012).



Although most of the connections students made were neither deep nor extensive, they tended to be validly grounded in ideas from the text, which we felt was a good start for ninth graders generally inexperienced with this sort of literary analysis.

The benefits of using exemplars were best exemplified by Hadiya, with whom we both had several conferences revolving around the samples. Hadiya's essay was about the help she received from Saila, her best friend, after learning that her uncle had died from cancer. She explained in the middle of the essay that Saila had calmed her by providing tissues and a drink, by asking questions about the uncle, and by suggesting that Hadiya write about her anger and pain rather than keeping it inside. Then, in her second-to-last paragraph, Hadiya connected Saila's support to what Andy, the main character of the novel *Tears of a Tiger*, received from his girlfriend after causing his best friend's death in a drunk-driving accident:

To me this relate to the book “Tears of a Tiger”. My story relate to this book because Andy’s friend passed away he was distraught and his girl Keisha she was trying to help him be strong. It made me think of my friend Saila. And how she was telling me to be strong. Andy was hurt and he couldn’t get his anger over it. But I did and I was ok. I really appreciate Saila and I’m thankful for her and everything she had done for me for helping me get through those situation.

Hadiya's paragraph could use some additional editing—it retains some characteristic features of writing by ELLs—but other aspects work well, including her recognition that her experiences were both similar to and different from Andy's. Initially, she struggled to organize this thinking and to link it to the story she was telling. Focused conversation around the exemplars helped her produce a more successful new draft.

Promoting Social Interaction Around the Writing

Another CCSS theme is the importance of “an integrated view of literacy” that “links the processes of communication” (p. 2). The document is thus consistent with many postsecondary classrooms and workplaces, where writing is often embedded in social relationships and linked to other language arts, such as talk and reading. Teaching these literacy aspects in conjunction with each other can leverage achievement in one domain to support growth in another.

Despite the CCSS call for an integrated view, however, the curriculum exemplars intended to help New York teachers envision the standards in practice tend to be much more explicit about how to design social interaction around reading than around writing. For example, EngageNY's sample lesson for grades 9 and 10, centered on the Gettysburg Address, provides considerable detail about text-dependent questions teachers might ask to support students' close reading of the text. At the end of the multi-lesson sequence, teachers are directed to assign a short analytical essay, but no recommendations are made about how to support that process, aside from this: “Remind students of the work they already completed and encourage them to review their notes and access the information they gathered to craft their response to this prompt” (n.p.). The curriculum exemplar for grades 11-12 is similar in offering a formal essay as assessment while providing limited guidance about how teachers might orchestrate its writing—just these two sentences in a 20-page document: “If teachers assign this essay for homework, they could have a writing workshop the following day, where students provide feedback to their classmates regarding their essay” and “Teachers could also assign the prompt as an in-class



essay, but also use the following day for peer-to-peer feedback.” Nowhere in either exemplar are teachers encouraged to confer with students as they write the culminating essays, to create an audience beyond the classroom, or to promote social interactions among peers over anything but an independently-completed draft. (Nor, hearkening back to the previous section, do the lessons ask students to read model texts in the genres they’re asked to construct.)

Our view, supported again by research (Graham & Perin, 2007), is that social interaction and collaboration throughout the writing process are essential for students to meet the writing-focused portions of the CCSS. For this reason, we built a variety of interactions, both teacher-to-student and student-to-student, into our instructional plans. Our insistence that students would talk about their writing to others was linked to a norm that John made explicit from September on: that the classroom community would be safe for learners to take risks and that no one would judge the topics students chose or the ideas they raised. As the Gift Essay unit began, we reminded students of this norm and linked it to our own experiences as writers who seek feedback from others, as intimidating as that can be. John explained:

Understand that I will never judge you for what you write, and I expect that of you [with each other]. It takes guts to write...It constricts people sometimes...when they feel like people are going to judge or make fun of [them] (field notes, March 16, 2012).

One-to-one conferences with teachers were a key form of social interaction intended to help students increase the quality of their writing. Ahanu, for example, was one of our most engaged writers: he usually began composing quickly and stayed focused, even when others were distracted. His pieces, however, were sometimes under-developed. Neither of us was surprised when he was the first to finish a Gift Essay draft, announcing 10 minutes into our second day in the lab that he was “done!” (field notes, March 21, 2012). During conferences, we insisted that he strengthen his literary connection, make better word choices, and edit his punctuation. Kelly’s field notes indicate how we held him accountable for more precision:

I sit with Ahanu and do one more edit of his essay on his cousin, whom he calls his brother, and the help he receives in the recording studio from him. I help him edit a little of the colloquial language out of it, and then I go through the rubric categories with him, one by one, telling him that I think he’s going to get a 3 or a 4 in everything except the second one, which is about a clear articulation of who the person is and how he helped him. I say he loses that a lot in the middle of the second and third paragraphs, and I challenge him to add a sentence or two to get this clearer. I also ask him if he really needs a sentence in paragraph 2 about his not being so enthralled with the studio, now that he’s used to it, which I say is interesting but not about his brother/cousin. He says he gets this, and he’s willing to delete it, so we do (field notes, March 23, 2012).

That Ahanu internalized lessons from these conferences was clear from his portfolio reflection, where he wrote about learning to include just the details that related back to his brother. His essay became more focused in each draft we collected.

Peer conferences were also part of how we scaffolded increased quality in students’ work. Early on, they conferred informally with each other around the assignment purpose and topic selection. Later, they met more formally over drafts to review the scoring rubric and give each other feedback in each category. Again, Ahanu provides an example of how social



interaction helped us hold students accountable for greater proficiency. He and Bianca, another of our most fluent writers, were the first two students to be approved for a peer conference, so we paired them. After giving them oral instructions and copies of the rubric, we set them up at a table in the lab. Their conversation was over almost before it began; neither seemed clear about what to discuss. Overnight, Kelly created a checklist (see Figure 5) to guide peer conferences that we distributed and John explained the following day. We required Ahanu and Bianca to redo their conference in light of these better elaborated expectations, and they had a more substantive conversation. He even chose his title from among her suggestions.

Figure 5:
Checklist for Peer Feedback

Have a conference with a peer in which you:

- Read the draft
- Write a note on the rubric in one of the five areas about something specific you like
- Write a note on the rubric in one of the five areas about something specific that will improve your partner's grade
- Write at least three different suggestions for titles on the rubric

Finally, we devised opportunities for the work to be shared with multiple audiences. During the celebration we planned, we had copies of Gift Essays from John's other English 9 class available for students to peruse and offer positive comments to the authors. We encouraged students to share their essays with those whom they featured in their writing. And three students, Ahanu among them, accepted our invitation to read their drafts aloud. After the social interactions described in this section, Ahanu's essay (see Figure 6) was one of the best we received. In fact, we selected him to read last, to end the program on a high note, and he received the two claps he requested as his form of class-wide appreciation with a wide smile that matched our own pride in what students had accomplished over the unit.

Success for Ahanu and his peers demonstrates for us the potential of sustaining best practices that predate the CCSS adoption while simultaneously working to address aspects of them that can support greater achievement. Students were engaged in the Gift Essay because we created a meaningful experience they valued, articulated a real purpose for the writing, provided them with some choice, promoted social interaction, and employed gradual release of responsibility by modeling the process ourselves, using exemplars, and creating space for independent application. They liked the idea that their teachers were working along with them in the process—that their teachers were writers, too. None of these approaches is specified in the CCSS document, but without them, the CCSS goals will be unattainable.

Conclusion

As we designed our writing pedagogy over six months of co-teaching, we immersed ourselves in both the Common Core State Standards for ELA/Literacy and a good deal of supplemental material about the CCSS. As we reflect on our inquiry, there is no doubt in our minds that we asked more of students and worked harder to support them in meeting that



challenge because of our familiarity with CCSS expectations. We want our students' work to be as good as—or better than—the student writing samples available in Appendix C (National Governors Association, 2012), and we believe that the increased focus on writing and greater consistency and coordination from CCSS implementation, K-12, will help yield that greater proficiency for students over time.

Figure 6:
Ahanu's Final Essay, "Life in the Studio"

My cousin that I call my brother taught me how to engineer in the studio. We were at my dad's house in Liverpool, using his studio. The room we were in was pretty big, colorful, with a lot of speakers and also two computers in it. There was a little room inside the big room that had a glass window so you can see everything that's going on. Inside the little room was a mic with foam covering the walls.

That was one of the best times of my life. It was also one of the inspiring times of my life, and fun. I still enjoy engineering other people and working with others' levels. It's like adventuring in the woods and finding something new every time you try. I feel my brother was really thoughtful for teaching me and I feel blessed.

I have a new computer now. It's a Mac. My brother doesn't know how to use it though. I have to teach him still to this day. So now, it's like I have to help him do something. He still knows how to use the basics of the engineering. He just doesn't know how to add effects to the vocals and mess around with the levels.

Even though I know how to engineer I still need more practice. I want to be perfect at what I do. My dad is the one who bought me all of my equipment, he told me to "master what I'm doing and take advantage of what I have." Then my brother told me the same thing so I really started to bounce back to the court.

When I'm working on one of my projects I always have my brother by my side. Even though he doesn't know how to add effects he tells me if it sounds clear or not. He taught me to make the double up sound like one voice. Once it sounds like that, it's perfect like [city name] when it's 70 degrees outside.

My brother reminds me of the psychiatrist from "Tears of a Tiger" that I read in English. The book was by Sharon Draper. The reason why is because when he taught me to engineer, it was like when the psychiatrist helped Andy with his problem. It's not in the same category but they both helped someone with a problem they had and taught them how to get rid of the problem.

Everyone in my group requires that I engineer their music. I thank my brother that he taught me what he did because I would have no clue what I'm doing. So always be thankful for people who try to tell you thinks make sure you take heave [heed]. Always make sure you listen because something good can be the outcome of their advice. Also thank them because without them telling you certain things you may not be where you are now.

At the same time, we continue to be concerned about the impact of some interpretations of the writing standards. As Applebee (2007) points out, "curriculum has a tendency to narrow around the types [of writing] that are assessed, often coupled with unintended effects on what



counts as writing well” (pp. 85-86). Seen in this light, the writing standards’ endorsement of just three text types may make teachers less likely to teach forms such as poetry that do not fit easily into those categories but that represent key purposes for writing out of school, including reflection and social critique. Moreover, we worry that comments like Coleman’s will create a backlash against narrative, making teachers less likely to address it thoroughly, despite its explicit inclusion within the text type standards. This is not to suggest our lack of support for increasing students’ opportunities to write persuasively or to communicate the results of their research, valuable forms that CCSS implementation should make more common in classrooms. But stigmatizing narrative, insisting on genre “purity” linked to standards W1-W3, or excluding other forms from the curriculum need not accompany such efforts.

Tom Newkirk (2012) makes a claim about nonfiction that resonates for us: “[N]arrative is the deep structure of all good writing...[E]ven research reports must tell a story” (p 29). According to Newkirk, accomplished informational writers such as Siddhartha Mukerjee in *Emperor of All Maladies*, his Pulitzer Prize-winning book about cancer, “never leave narrative far behind. Instead, they use narrative in more complex and embedded ways” (p. 32). For writers with emerging skills like those in our class, the use of an anecdotal lead and other narrative structures can eventually be transferred to a more traditionally argumentative or explanatory text, both in English class and in other content areas. First, however, it must be understood and controlled, a process facilitated by students learning the skill in a scaffolded, familiar context. We saw the benefits of such a carefully-sequenced approach ourselves when we asked students to transfer planning, revision, and peer response strategies from the Gift Essay unit to a more purely analytical essay about the impact of relationships on a central character in August Wilson’s play *Fences*.

Ultimately, we see value in teachers’ viewing the genres on which writing instruction might be centered as more diverse and more hybrid than the discrete standards in the Writing: Text Types and Purposes section of the Common Core suggest. The introduction to the CCSS document itself acknowledges that “several standards can be addressed by a single rich task” (p. 3), although the examples are more focused on how a task might integrate standards from one portion of the document—Writing, for instance—with those from another, such as Language. The introduction is less clear that the assignments teachers craft need not fit neatly into a single column of a genre matrix. The potential for framing the text types as discrete categories is further exacerbated by the singular labels provided for the student work samples in Appendix C.

New York ELA teachers can resist these narrow framings, however, without undercutting the potential improvement to our writing pedagogy of heeding calls in the CCSS for increased rigor in our expectations and greater variety in our assignments. Implementation of the CCSS need not require seeing genre narrowly or banishing narrative to a backseat in the classroom. Our ninth graders’ success in marrying elements of narrative and other genres in their Gift Essays suggests that narrative may indeed be a gift to them as developing writers, one we should not withhold even as we offer them other experiences, tools, and ways of thinking.



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